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THE NATURE-POETRY OF THE PSALMS

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III. THE LANDSCAPE

There is little landscape description either in Homer or in the Psalter. Little pictures are not uncommon in ancient poetry, but the rush of the story was too impetuous, or the stress of human feeling too violent, for any dallying on the way to paint natural scenery for its own sake. Homer is lured on by "the bright eyes of danger;" the Psalmist poets pay little attention to the objective world. The landscape where the hero performs his feats, or where Diana engages in the chase, is understood to be beautiful, and the colors used by the poet are put on with a sparing hand. To the epic or to the psalm there is scarcely any background whatever; the Homeric poems and the Psalms are alike in their subjection of natural beauty to humanity and movement. The poet cannot bear to take his eyes from the human or divine actor for long; if he does linger for a moment to describe a pleasant scene, it is merely for purposes of illustration, or because the view elicits his admiration because of its fruitfulness, or his hate because of its repellent features. In both Greek and Hebrew poetry Nature is described in her large, actual, true aspect, with small talk of beauty and much emphasis of the useful; either a large brush is used by the painter, or a thumb-nail sketch is effected.

Ruskin has described Homer's method of treating landscape,¹ and the Grecian habit of subserving all the beauty of earth to the human comfort—to the foot, the taste, or the smell; the plain grass, fruit, or flower is referred to in matter-of-fact language. The ideal landscape to the Greek was subservient to human service; it was ideal precisely because it offered good pasturage, fruitful soil, or pleasant shade. Every ideal landscape, Ruskin points out, is composed of a fountain, a meadow, and a shady grove. Mercury halts

¹ *Modern Painters* (1860), Vol. III, pp. 184 ff.

on his swift message to behold with gladness a landscape consisting of a cave covered with a running vine, grape-laden, and surrounded by a grove of alder, poplar, and sweet-smelling cypress. In an orderly row are four fountains of white water running through a moist meadow full of violets and parsley. Calypso sings beside her fire of finely chopped cedar wood, which exhales a smoke as of incense through the island, and owls, hawks, and "long-tongued sea-crows" roost in the branches of the trees.² In the *Odyssey* the garden of Alcinous further emphasizes, and with more prosaic detail, the main features of the ideal Homeric landscape. It is not so very different from a great garden of the present day, such as the writer has often seen in the Niagara peninsula in Canada. The vegetables, among which there are plenty of onions, flourish in "orderly square beds" between long rows of vines, hanging heavy with clusters of grapes; two fountains run through the garden, and there is an abundance of pear, apple, and fig trees. Foliage and meadow and running water, with their wood and corn and drink, flatness, fertility, order—these are all summed up in the description of the Cyclops' country, to the wandering Greek a perfect land.

They have soft, marshy meadows near the sea, and good, rich, crumbling, plowing-land, giving fine deep crops, and vines always giving fruit; a port so quiet that they have no need of cables in it; and at the head of the port, a beautiful clear spring just under a cave, and aspen poplars all around it.³

The Greeks disliked rocks and mountains, although to the modern eye it is the mountain scenery which is most attractive. To Homer, and to the practical men of his time, the rough country was distasteful. Pallas apologizes to Ulysses for the roughness of his native land; but she does not fail to portray its good points, and in her speech both the objectionable and ideal aspects of the landscape are summed up with masterly directness and common-sense. She says:

This Ithaca of ours is, indeed, a rough country enough and not good for driving in; but still, things might be worse: it has plenty of corn, and good wine, and always rain, and soft, nourishing dew; and it has good feeding for goats and oxen, and all manner of wood, and springs fit to drink at all the year around.⁴

But what was the Psalmist's ideal landscape? With Homer, as we have seen, it was rich meadow-land or a piece of well-tilled ground.

² *Iliad*, ii, 776.

³ *Odyssey*, ix, 132 ff.

⁴ *Ibid.*, xiii, 236 ff.

Fertility and order are likewise characteristics of the Psalmist's ideal. The Greeks had a horror of the mountains; in this respect alone is their ideal of landscape different from that of Hebrew poetry. The Psalmist, however, in looking up to the mountains admires them not for their picturesque or sublime effects, but because he sees on their fertile slopes the cattle feeding on the rich pasturage.⁵ "He maketh the grass to grow upon the mountains," is an ascription of praise to God; but this verse was not suggested by the beauty of those modest spears of green, as Ruskin would have us believe in the prose poem which he founds upon these quiet words; the Psalmist poet simply looked upon the grass as food for cattle; he looked with the practical eye of the farmer on the abundance of the pasture on the mountains. The context effectually disposes of any poetic interpretation of this verse, and shows the matter-of-fact thought of the Psalmist:

Sing to Jehovah a song of thanksgiving,
 Play to our God on the harp!
 He covers the heavens with clouds,
 He prepares rain for the earth,
 He maketh the grass to grow upon the mountains.
 He gives to the cattle their food,
 And to the young ravens that croak.

The picture of messianic peace and plenty in Ps. 72 is reflected in minor glimpses of agricultural landscape. Ps. 65 is a festal song. It recites the goodness of God in watering the land with the autumn rains, and contains a prayer for more rain, probably the later rain of March and April which is needed to mature the crop.

Thou hast visited the land and watered it;
 Thou hast greatly enriched it;
 The river of God is full of water.
 Thou wilt now prepare their harvest,
 Since thou hast thus prepared it.
 Water its furrows, make its clods even,
 With soft rain make it mellow, bless thou its growth!
 Thou hast crowned the year of thy goodness,
 The paths trickle with fatness,
 The meadows of the pasture-land trickle,
 The hills bedeck themselves with joy.
 With flocks the meadows are covered,
 And the valleys are covered with corn;
 They shout for joy; yea, they sing.

⁵ Ps. 50:10.

In this homely piece of landscape the poet has the eye of a Flemish painter; he delights to fill his landscape with fat beeves and sheep reposing quietly on the green meadows. His fancy takes flight for a moment with the mention of "the river of God"—an allusion to the mythical stream in the house of the skies which is discharged in rain at God's command. But the poet continues in the next line with good common-sense to mark the thirsty furrows and the hard clods, and, farmer-like, he sees the necessity for more rain, and prays for it accordingly. His prayer is answered, and he is so overjoyed at the prospect of a full granary that he rises into the realm of the beautiful and the imaginative. He sings a song of a fair valley, ripe unto the harvest—a broad sweep of yellow cornfields, lying between rolling hills; and hills and meadows sing for joy. This is one of the rare instances in Hebrew poetry where the singer transfers his emotions to natural objects and makes them join man in acclamation to God.⁶

If we would see more of farming life or of agricultural landscape as the Psalmist saw it, we must rely upon slight sketches and few, written by chance as it were. The color is faint, and only broad and hurried lines are used; but the smell of the soil, of the rich, brown earth, is here in enduring freshness after the passage of ages. What an immortal epitome of the farmer's toil, year after year in every century the same, is this exquisite strophe of Ps. 126:

Turn Thou, O Jehovah, our captivity,
Like channels in the dry land
Those who sowed in tears
Will reap with shouts of joy.
The sower of seed goes forth weeping,
With shouts of joy he returns, bearing his sheaves.

Ps. 129 contains two pictures suggested by sowing and reaping. First the poet exclaims against the wicked:

Ploughers have ploughed on my back,
They have made their furrows long.

Then the poet imagines what shall be their harvest, and he draws a little cameo of the well-known scene in early spring on the roof-tops of Palestine, where a crop of bright-green grass nourished by the

⁶ See Pss. 96:11, 12; 98:7, 8.

rains withers and falls dead before the hot sun. The psalm is also interesting as it contains the ancient Israelitish salutation to reapers, the customary answer to which may be found in Ruth 2:4. But here is the Psalmist's simple picture of ephemeral growth:

It happens to them as to grass on the roofs,
Which withers before it shoots up;
Wherewith a reaper cannot fill his hand,
Nor a binder of sheaves fill his arm;
And those who pass by do not say:
"The blessing of Jehovah be on you,
In Jehovah's name do we bless you!"

Another sinister simile furnished by agriculture occurs in Ps. 141:7:

Just as when a man ploughs and harrows the earth,
Are our bones scattered at the jaws of Sheol.

To the majority of readers, however, the most beautiful piece of landscape-painting in the Psalter is Ps. 23. No two delusions are more popular than to suppose that David wrote all the psalms, and that the background for the Psalms as a whole might well be the pastoral scene of the twenty-third psalm. Few readers of the Psalter imagine that the poets who composed these lyrics were toilers in the busy towns of Palestine, or those who sat in exile beneath the shadow of Babylonian palaces, or simple farmers trimming their vines and planting their corn in the Judea of the Maccabean period. The entrancing loveliness of the twenty-third psalm, the sweet idyl of shepherd life, has cast all other nature-description of the Psalter into comparative obscurity, and we are apt to regard Palestine of old as a land of shepherds and pleasant valleys and winding streams. But, while there have always been and are today shepherds in the Holy Land tending their flocks on the hillsides, the agricultural scenes in the Psalter are more thoroughly representative of the landscape of the country and come nearer to the common ideal of the practical Jew. The twenty-third psalm, however, is the ideal landscape of the smaller shepherd class, and carries with it such an atmosphere of perfect peace and rest that it stands as our ideal of Bible landscape. The poem is wonderfully simple, and, although it is graphic, the effects are obtained by terse, quick sketching—a movement which brings a new image with every line. The divine Shep-

herd, the pastures of young grass, the quiet waters, the sure paths, the gloomy ravine, the defending club and guiding staff, and finally the scene of rude hospitality under the black tent—these pictures come up one after the other in rapid succession, and are drawn almost with unpremeditated art. The attempts of modern commentators to fill in the foreground and background of this simple landscape serve to show the difference between the present genius for detail and the ancient disregard for delicate tints and fanciful touches. The Psalmist finds nothing in the landscape which would puzzle the unpoetical sightseer; he sees green grass and water and a dark ravine; there are food and rest, a kind shepherd, a table at which the stranger finds refreshment and shelter from the avenger. If we would gratify our curiosity as to fine effects and obtain a closer view of the scene, we must seek information from the brush of a modern painter who has visited Palestine, and who can supply us with an abundance of what we term in our modern phrase “local color.” The Psalmist, in his sublime indifference to detail, left a problem for his unexpected millions of readers in his brief allusion to the table prepared in the midst of enemies. At last Professor George Adam Smith⁷ has offered what seems to be a very satisfactory explanation. The whole poem, he declares, instead of the first half alone, as many commentators have supposed, reflects pastoral life. The last two stanzas take us into the shepherd’s brown-black tent, where his table is set and where he dispenses “the golden piety of the wilderness” to “the guest of God,” the man who has shed blood and who is fleeing across the desert wilds with the avenger hot upon his track. By the ancient usage, so remarkable in a rude age, a man was bound to receive the guilty fugitive as a guest, and care for him and protect him from his pursuers during a certain length of time, usually three days. Here is a description of the landscape from the modern writer:

The landscape is nearly all glare, monotonous levels or low ranges of hillocks, with as little character upon them as the waves of the sea, shimmering with mirage under a cloudless heaven. The bewildering monotony is broken by only two exceptions. Here and there the ground will be cleft by a deep ravine, which gapes in black contrast to the glare, and by its sudden darkness blinds the men

⁷ See article on “The Twenty-Third Psalm,” by G. A. Smith, *Expositor*, 1895, p. 38.

and sheep that enter it to the beasts of prey that have their lairs in its recesses. But there are also hollows as gentle and lovely as the ravines are terrible, where water bubbles up and runs quietly between grassy banks under the open shade of trees.

It is strange that a Psalmist poet should have drawn an illustration from pastoral landscape to describe the descent to death, but a scene in Ps. 49 shows the wicked being led by their shepherd, Death, down into Sheol, and being folded there in that dreary, shadowy, underground city, where they are gathered with their fathers and never behold the glad light of day any more:

Like sheep unresisting they are thrust down into Sheol,
Death is their shepherd, and their forms shall waste away;
Sheol shall be their castle for ever,
And the upright shall trample upon them in the morning.

The objectionable aspects of Palestinian landscape are frequently described in the Psalter, although not with any great fulness. The first psalm not only depicts the ideal man, but also shows the fate of the wicked by a reference to nature. The wicked man, according to the philosophy of the Psalmist, shall come to nought, as the chaff which the wind driveth away, the reference here being to the threshing-floor which was situated on a hill where the wind could get a clear sweep at the chaff. The wicked man perishes because God takes no notice of him, and he fades away like a false road, a misleading track, in the illimitable desert sands. The opposite of cheerfulness and usefulness is that which is unfruitful or desert land. Two dangers confronted the farmer: failure of the crops owing to drought, and the ravages of the tempest and the burning fiery wind. The shepherd disliked the rocky gorges and deep ravines where the wild beasts lurked in the covert and the footing was insecure. The pilgrim or merchant dreaded the wide expanse of desert. The exile in Babylon had a highlander's aversion for the flats of the land between the rivers, and sighed for the hills of home. In the Psalter, therefore, if we do not find any set descriptions of the parched land, the waste places, the desert, or the Babylonian lowland, there are numerous allusions which vent these dislikes.

The aversion of the Psalmist poets to the sun-parched landscape, and to the waste place where loneliness and gloom keep company,

even to the loneliness often felt in a crowd, when one is like "the solitary bird on the roof," is nowhere more forcibly expressed than in Ps. 102, supposed to have been written by a fugitive in the wilderness:

For my days vanish like smoke,
 And my bones glow like a brand.
 Parched like the grass and withered is my heart;
 Yea, I forget to eat my bread.
 Because of my moaning my bones cleave to my skin.
 I am like a screech-owl in the wilderness,
 I am become as an owl amid ruins.
 I am sleepless and I mourn
 Like a solitary bird on the roof.

 My days are like a lengthened shadow;
 And I wither like grass.

A second class of landscape metaphors is suggested by pastoral life. The shepherd longs for good mountain paths, for sure footing; he slips into bogs and miry places, he hates the dark ravines. You see him on the edge of a precipice: "If my foot slip, they will triumph. For I stand on the verge of falling" (Ps. 38:16, 17); "Thou hast saved my life from death, yea, my foot from falling" (Ps. 56:13); "Well-nigh were my feet gone from under me, there was nothing to keep my steps from slipping" (Ps. 73:2). In the same psalm the fate of the wicked is described:

It is but on slippery ground that thou settest them,
 Down to ruin thou hurlest them.
 How in a moment they are turned to nothing!
 Gone! Ended by terrors!

The ever-recurring reference to God as "a strong rock" is the commonest metaphor derived from pastoral life.

A very vague description of the desert is contained in Ps. 107:

They who wandered in the wilderness, in the pathless desert,
 And found not a city to dwell in,
 Hungry and thirsty,
 Their soul fainting within them—
 When they cried to Jehovah in their trouble,
 He delivered them from their distresses,
 He brought them on the right road,
 To reach a city to dwell in.

The chief horror in the desert landscape is its tracklessness; it is the danger of going astray and being lost in the dreary sea of sand that impresses the poet most. The monotony of the scenery does not seem to tire his eye, nor do the picturesque elements of desert landscape attract his gaze. He has no eye for brilliant sunsets, or for the sirocco sweeping the desert-floor like a red besom of destruction; he has no word-picture of the oasis, the diamond of the desert, nor yet for the ghastly skeletons of men and camels that line the route of the caravan. Every eastern traveler has described all these aspects of the desert landscape with painful insistence, but no Psalmist poet has sketched such scenes as he saw them. In his practical way he uses general terms and comprehensive figures. The following passage (Ps. 107:33-43) is in his best utilitarian style, and sums up the difference, as he saw it, between an ideal and an ugly landscape:

He turns streams into desert,
And fountains into parched ground,
A land of fruit into a salt waste,
Because of the wickedness of those who dwell therein.
He turns deserts into pools of water,
And parched ground into fountains;
There he settles the hungry,
That they may establish a city to dwell in,
Sow fields and lay out vineyards,
And gather the fruits of the harvest;
He blesses them so that they greatly increase,
And he suffers not their cattle to decrease.
He pours out contempt upon nobles,
And in pathless deserts makes them wander astray,
So that they are minished and brought low,
By oppression of evil and sorrow.
But the poor man he lifts out of his misery,
And increases his kindred like a flock of sheep.